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Note on Preemption and Instability

I have always seen the problem of error, false alarm, accident, unauthorized action and loss of control as real and major, but as secondary to the problem of deliberate initiation of nuclear war.

From 1958 to 1961 my concern was for a Soviet surprise attack. That was the period of the "missile gap" and Rand's concern with vulnerability (emphasizing a "deterrence gap"). (That is the specter raised again by the Committee on Present Danger and picked up by Reagan: the "window of vulnerability" hoax, a rerun of the bomber and missile gaps).

That concern vanished with the discovery of the true missile gap in favor of the US. What the new intelligence estimates revealed was not only the absence of Soviet capability to launch a surprise attack, but the absence of any real effort to achieve it, undermining the earlier intelligence and Rand appreciation of Soviet intentions.

But in 1962 in the Cuban Missile Crisis I acquired a concern for nuclear war as a deliberate option of a US President: not a surprise attack--the obverse of my earlier concern (and still the bogey of some critics of US pursuit of a First Strike capability: an image that I think sacrifices credibility in the eyes of the public)--but as an escalation of a limited conflict, probably in the Third World, and perhaps as preemption (a contingency important in the earlier phase as well).

My 1964 study of nuclear crises confirmed this concern, and added a focus on US first-use against a Third World adversary, as in Quemoy.

A challenge to me would be: Are you, DE, as wrong about the possibility that a US President would initiate nuclear war--or preempt--as you were about the possibility that the Soviets would launch a surprise attack?

The latter was not just my error, it was the consensus of those I worked with. However, it is true that others did not accept it then (outside the government) and that I was susceptible to the belief.

But the fact that US experts and military planners believed it was significant...for what it tells about them! They could see a supposed Soviet attack as a "rational, perhaps optimal" choice (AJW), and indeed, deprecated contrary evidence; in this spirit, they sought to have exactly the kind of posture they would most have feared in Soviet hands, the kind that would make nuclear war "rational" in a crisis, if anything would. That is a major part of my concern that they might really do it (as US presidents have threatened, and Soviets have, on the whole, not).

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Above all, their own apprehension of a Soviet attack reflected a belief they still hold: that from the point of view of a military planner (US or Soviet) it can make sense, be realistic, to believe that nuclear war can be limited, and "won" in the sense of achieving political/military goals that make it worthwhile compared to foregoing it: it could be the optimal thing to do; moreover, that even in general nuclear war, damage-limiting is possible, to a degree that is worth expensive preparations (even ones that may increase the likelihood of general war erupting from a crisis!) and that can justify preemption.

This distinguishes them both from Gorbachev and, now at least, McNamara. It is my knowledge of these beliefs, from my work on war planning and work with Rand believers in counterforce, damage-limiting, and "war-fighting" --as much or more than my work with advocates of nuclear threats, like Herman Kahn--that is the main source of my high estimate of the likelihood of US-initiated nuclear war, my fear that nuclear first-use threats are not just bluffs. And it is this knowledge that separates me from most other "experts," who put the risk of nuclear war, and particularly US-initiated nuclear war, very much lower. In turn, they are led to put the risks of the arms race (with its counterforce trend) and of US interventions much lower than I do.

Actually, I have talked rather little about either of these beliefs in public or in print: emphasizing instead the making of FU threats, and the actual capabilities, and threat qualities, of the new strategic forces. (And Betts, for example, ignores--does he not?--this interaction of first-use threats with force characteristics and development, the arms race, as well as these attitudes toward D-L, etc. Only Ford really refers to the latter. Scheer misreads the interest in first-strike capability; Aldridge likewise. Halperin deprecates the realism of the thinking--in particular the political utility of threats--as McNamara deprecates the realism of both D-L and threats. But they ignore the impact of the beliefs.

My own thinking is not that such notions were realistic for the Soviets if they had had nuclear superiority as we expected, nor that they are likewise realistic today in the US: but that they were and are held in the US, and shape not only the arms race and the likelihood of threats, but the likelihood that such threats might someday be carried out.

To a striking degree, my research agenda, like my political concerns, remains what it became a quarter-century ago, while I was still in the government. For even longer than that, my main preoccupation has been both to understand and to avert the prospect of general nuclear war.

But it was my participation in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and my official study in 1964, with high-level access to

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"sensitive" secret information, of decision-making in nuclear crises, that first shaped my present sense of the most likely way that general nuclear war might come about: thus, my sense of the specific phenomena that most need to be understood and prevented.

My own high-level participation in the process of escalating the Vietnam war in 1964-65, my experience in the field in Vietnam in the next two years, followed by my reading of the Pentagon Papers study, all strengthened this sense. And my research since then, including that of the last eighteen months, has sharpened and confirmed it.

What I see as the most likely route to general nuclear war is that an American president--or in the not-too-distant future, some leader of a newly nuclear-armed state--may someday deliberately choose, in what he sees as a desperate situation, to initiate "limited, tactical" nuclear war in the course of an ongoing theretofore non-nuclear conflict, probably in the Third World, and probably against an adversary that did not itself possess nuclear weapons.

This decision would probably be preceded by several others leading up to it. Working backwards in time, these would probably include:

--a U.S. threat of nuclear first-use (of the sort I have found that U.S. presidents have frequently conveyed in the past, in secret from the American public, when U.S. or allied troops were surrounded and endangered, or when a new president was confronted by a costly stalemate, as in Korea 1953 or Vietnam 1969);

--before that, probably a decision to intervene with U.S. combat forces in a local conflict;

--and before that, a growing sense of U.S. commitment to protect "vital interests" in that area, of an economic or geopolitical nature, probably strengthened by direct but covert intervention stimulating or taking part in the local conflict.

That choice would almost surely lead--even if civilians or cities were not direct targets--to a slaughter of noncombatants in the country attacked that would be enormous by historical standards though perhaps not unprecedented. (I.e., it could range from tens of thousands to several million deaths). But it would not by itself make general war certain.

If such a choice of first-use were ever made, it would have to be by a leader (probably male) who was willing, in a wartime situation, to kill very large numbers of civilians (the words "massacre" or "terrorism" might not be applied by some Americans to such an action, ordered by an American president, in wartime,

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but they would be technically appropriate), and to take a considerable chance that there would be at least some limited nuclear retaliation, at great cost to American forces and perhaps civilians. But this leader would also have to be one capable of gambling that his decision would not lead to general war.

Even if his first-use of nuclear weapons was against a non-nuclear adversary, the leader would be aware of the risk that an all-out nuclear exchange might result, by way of reaction from a nuclear-armed ally or sponsor of the immediate adversary, such as the Soviet Union. But if he went ahead it would probably be in the hope that there would be no nuclear retaliation at all, either limited or general, thus that his use of nuclear weapons would be unilateral. Or at worst, that any retaliation would be sharply limited, perhaps to a reprisal in kind against US or allied tactical units in the field.

That gamble might be rewarded. The Soviet Union, no matter what commitments or deterrent threats it had made earlier, might draw back from carrying them out despite the US nuclear attack on its ally or client, because of the risk of US attacks against its own forces, and the resulting risk of general nuclear war if it did respond. But it might not.

If the Soviets did respond in kind to US first-use against a Soviet ally in the Third World, again, even in the most "limited" fashion (perhaps against a US carrier) all-out nuclear war would still not be quite certain, but it would be likely and close. The chance of loss of communications and tactical control early in this unprecedented two-sided nuclear exchange would be great, likewise the fears on both sides of this prospect of loss of control and of enemy escalation, and the pressures to preempt to attempt to disarm or paralyze the opponent would be intense on both sides.

In a given case, the decision-makers and their subordinates on both sides might resist these pressures. Or, I believe, they might not. If they do not, some form of nuclear winter is likely to result in the Northern Hemisphere, and perhaps the globe.

If general nuclear war does occur, I believe it will most likely come as the culmination of this sequence of events. And I believe that this course of events is quite possible, and that in some respects it is becoming more rather than less likely.

[U.S. presidential tendencies to pursue covert operations, to back them up with U.S. combat intervention if necessary, and to back up such intervention with first-use nuclear threats if necessary, continue unabated. Developments in "tactical" nuclear weaponry, including greater accuracy and specialized warheads, increase the military incentive to initiate their use against a non-nuclear opponent.

The Soviet Union--perhaps even under Gorbachov--looks less likely to back down in the face of a first-use threat or use than in the period 25 years ago when the U.S. still had a virtual strategic monopoly. And developments on both sides in strategic nuclear weapons greatly increase the incentive to preempt to general war if a localized two-sided nuclear exchange occurs.

(There are, of course, also countertendencies: the scale of the newly-informed and mobilized antinuclear movement worldwide; the changes in the Soviet Union under Gorbachov; the recent moves toward detente and arms control even under Reagan, and the possibility of still greater movement under a Democratic successor.)]

To say that this is to say that each and every link in this chain of contingencies, and each development that furthers the coupling of events and decisions toward general nuclear war, deserves, as I see it, urgent political resistance.

I have myself been acting politically over the last dozen years in a variety of ways and with a sense of urgency that reflects precisely my own belief in the argument above: among other things, in ways that have led to several dozen arrests for actions of nonviolent civil resistance. At the same time I have pursued urgently my efforts better to understand these humanly baffling and ominous phenomena; that is what this research is all about.